

The Ermatingers

W. Brian Stewart

The Ermatingers:
A 19th-Century Ojibwa-
Canadian Family



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To Jenny, Bill, and Ellen

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The Ermatingers



Figure 1
Ermatinger country

Introduction

About 1800, fur trader Charles Oakes Ermatinger, of Swiss-German and English descent, married, country-style, Mananowe Katawabidai, daughter of an Ojibwa chief. They had twelve children, seven of whom reached adulthood. The children spent their early years in Sault Ste Marie in contact with their Ojibwa relatives and socializing with their Métis neighbours in what John Bigsby described as “the wild man’s land.” The older children went to Montreal for a traditional Canadian education, and in 1828 the whole family moved there. The children lived the rest of their lives mainly in Canadian urban communities but retained ties with their Ojibwa relatives. In 1850, four Ojibwa chiefs of the Sault Ste Marie area petitioned the Canadian government that the local “half breed” families, explicitly including the Ermatingers, be given title to the lands they occupied in the area. The families deserved this because they were “the children of the sisters and the daughters of your Memorialists thus having an inheritance in the country equal to our own, and bound to it by as strong and heartfelt ties as we ourselves.”¹

In recent years, much has been written on fur trader-Indian families, usually by analyzing and generalizing over a relatively large number of cases. But Jennifer S.H. Brown writes, “More detailed family histories with time depths of three, four or five generations, could bring out important and subtle comparisons and paths of change” among the Métis. Such histories would contribute “richer perspectives, not only on individuals and families, but on Métis social history in the broadest sense.”² The current book is such a study, showing the bicultural nature, urban Canadian and Upper Country Ojibwa, of the Ermatinger family, and the outcomes of the children’s lives in urban Canada.³ To place the family in its wider context, this introduction briefly reviews the range of outcomes of other fur trader-Indian marriages and of the lives of their progeny. It focuses on children who, like the Ermatingers, were taken out of the Upper Country and sent to urban Canada or Britain for their education.

RELATIONS BETWEEN TRADER AND NATIVE WIFE

From the first French arrivals in Canada, European traders married Indian women country-style, that is, they cohabited after no formal or religious ceremony other than a present or “bride price” to their father-in-law. These connections had more advantages for the husband than just sex and companionship. The Native wife had many skills beyond normal housekeeping. She interpreted and acted as guide, trapped small animals for food and furs, and made moccasins and snowshoes.⁴ She often made life bearable and even possible for her husband: possible because he often lacked her survival skills, while family relationships with her people helped ensure a steady supply of furs. For their part, Indian women marrying white traders gained useful technology for themselves and often helped gain similar access for their sisters. “It was much easier to boil water in a metal kettle,” Sylvia Van Kirk points out, “than to laboriously heat it by means of dropping hot stones into a bark container.”⁵ Women also increased their influence and status through intermarriage.

From a Marxist point of view, Ron Bourgeault sees marriage to a white trader as changing the Indian woman’s role and status for the worse. The fur trade, he claims, transformed the primitive Indian society into a feudal society set up to extract the surplus labour of the Native people. The trader’s wife lost both the equality and the decision-making powers characteristic of wives in the Indian family. Meanwhile, he alleges, traders exploited their wives politically and sexually, using them as a commodity to gain access to specific groups for trading purposes.⁶

In fact, we find wide variation in the way white traders treated their country wives.⁷ At one abysmal extreme stood Frank Ermatinger, a nephew of Charles Oakes Ermatinger (see Appendix E). Affairs with Native women were, he said, compensation “to counterbalance the misery of Damned Dried Salmon.” After deserting a Cree woman and daughter, an Okanagan and two children, and a Flathead and three children (sometimes with no compensation), he formally wed a young Indian-Canadian woman, Catherine Sinclair. They finally settled in St Thomas.⁸ Similarly, Scottish-born fur trader Duncan Cameron warned a young relative in 1812 that he should not “let love to get the better of Reason.” If he were to marry before he was properly settled, then all his future prospects would be lost: “This I too well know by dear bought experience.” Cameron deserted his Ojibwa wife and family for Upper Canada and, in 1820, married Margaret McLeod. They had a daughter and three sons.⁹ At the other extreme, many country marriages were successful and stable and continued for the life of the partners. For example, Alexander Ross, a Scot by birth, married an Okanagan woman, Sally. Ross said that affection for their Native wives formed the traders’ attachment to the Indian country.¹⁰

Relatively few traders with Indian (rather than Métis) wives took them out of Indian country. Among those who did, Nor’Wester John Dugald Cameron

in 1846 retired with his Native wife, Mary, and their family to Upper Canada. There, Mary adjusted well to her new environment and helped manage their farm. However, the Native wife of Allan McDonell (1776-1859) found herself “quite out of her element” in her new and elegant home in Montreal.¹¹

Some fur traders who had married according to the custom of the country regularized their marriages when they took their families to the Canadas. Nor'Wester Pierre Marois considered his country marriage legal, yet on moving to Lower Canada, remarried his wife according to church and civil law. This was wise, as country-style marriages could raise legal problems. Alexander Fraser took his wife, Angélique, and their children to Lower Canada where he also fathered several children by two Canadiennes. He apparently treated all three mothers well and the children with equal affection, but left a complex legal case of legitimacy to be sorted out upon his death.¹²

THE FATHER AND HIS BICULTURAL CHILDREN

In a study of fur trade children baptized in Montreal's St Gabriel Street Presbyterian Church between 1796 and 1835, Jennifer Brown finds that boys outnumbered girls by about two to one. She concludes that anglophone trader fathers, more anxious to advance their sons than they were their daughters, personally directed the boys' education and placement.¹³ Formal education, she argues, tended to affect strongly, and not always beneficially, the child's sense of identity. Often, the father wanted his children to suppress their Indian background. George Atkinson of the Hudson's Bay Company and his Indian wife, Necushin, had two sons and a daughter. Son Sneppy went to England in 1790 and was baptized as George. His father hoped this would “shake off a little of the Indian & in so doing make him exert himself like a Man.”¹⁴

Sylvia Van Kirk concludes that to succeed in their father's world the children learned to suppress “every vestige of their Indian heritage,” although racism sometimes prevented full assimilation. Fur traders often pushed mixed-blood daughters into an “increasingly passive and dependent mould” in sharp contrast to the “autonomy and self-reliance of the Indian woman.”¹⁵ Van Kirk points out that in the racist climate of North America at that time, bicultural children were often caught between two worlds, unable to see themselves as Métis but not fully accepted by whites.¹⁶ As Elizabeth Arthur says of one mixed-blood family, “The sense of belonging to neither their father's culture nor their mother's must have been overpowering.”¹⁷ The influence of Indian or Métis mothers on their children is much less well documented than that of their fur trade fathers.

As will be shown, Charles Oakes, in his role as father, is similar in some respects to the fathers just described, but he also differs in important ways. The differences may be explained in part because most studies of dual-descent children have concerned the offspring of employees of either the

North West Company or of the Hudson's Bay Company. Though Charles Oakes Ermatinger had dealings with both those companies, he was primarily an independent trader conditioned by neither of their corporate cultures.

BICULTURAL CHILDREN OUTSIDE INDIAN COUNTRY

Brown's study also shows that between 1796 and 1835 St Gabriel Street Presbyterian Church baptized or buried eighty-nine children who came from Indian country. Ranging from infancy to thirteen years of age, almost all were partly of Indian descent. Almost one baptized child in eight died within three or four years of baptism. For Brown this mortality rate reflects the separation from one or both parents after long journeys to Montreal.¹⁸ Those children who reached adulthood generally followed one of three life paths: they could attempt to assimilate in white, Canadian society; they could try to return to their Indian roots; or they could combine elements of both heritages in a third, or Métis, culture.

Integration with White Society

George Barnston of the Hudson's Bay Company married country-style a mixed-blood woman, Ellen Matthews. When appointed to Tadoussac in 1844, Barnston wrote that he could now give his eleven children a better education, "an object ever near to my heart."¹⁹ He succeeded. Among his sons were a lawyer in British Columbia, a banking bookkeeper in Belleville, Upper Canada, and a clerk in Montreal. One daughter married a merchant in Colombo, Ceylon, and another the manager of an assurance company.²⁰ The most remarkable child was the eldest, James. After school in Red River, Manitoba, and Lachine, Lower Canada, at age twenty-one he gained his medical diploma at the University of Edinburgh and returned to Montreal to start a practice. A keen botanist, in 1857 he became the first professor of botany at McGill, though he died the following year.²¹

Alexander Ross thought "mixed bloods" were genetically inferior and he pushed his children to succeed in white society. After attending the University of Toronto, his son James returned to Red River and during the first Riel troubles spoke on behalf of the English-speaking settlers. Another son held various official positions in Assiniboia, while three daughters all married "well" into white society.²² The Rosses, while affectionate towards, and not overtly ashamed of, their Indian mother, in private still asked defensively, "What if Mama is an Indian?"²³

Alexander Kennedy Isbister, grandson of a Hudson's Bay Company employee and a Cree woman, was educated first in the Orkneys, birthplace of his father, and then in Red River. When he was sixteen, he joined the Hudson's Bay Company but left after four years, unhappy because he felt his Native ancestry had held up any promotion. He earned a brilliant degree at the University of Aberdeen and began a successful career in Britain as a

teacher and textbook author. Though outside Métis society, he never forgot his roots and fought for the rights of his Native and Métis peoples.²⁴

Integration with Indian Society

Children educated outside Indian country who returned to their Indian roots are more difficult to trace, because records of their lives were often not kept. For instance, Frank Ermatinger sent Lawrence, his son by an Okanagan, to be educated in St Thomas in Upper Canada. Lawrence, a pathetic figure later found destitute in Montreal, drifted back west to a fate unknown even to his father.²⁵

The father of Ranald MacDonald was Archibald McDonald (the original family spelling), a senior officer of the Hudson's Bay Company. Ranald's mother, who died shortly after his birth in 1824, was the daughter of a major west coast Chinook chief. For a short period, Ranald's Chinook aunt looked after him, but then Archibald's second wife, Jane Klyne, probably of French-Indian descent, lovingly raised the boy along with the thirteen children she bore his father. In his youth, Ranald travelled widely around the Pacific Northwest posts with his father, but his memoirs make little reference to any contact as a youth with his Indian relatives. "I have not the remotest idea of the ceremonial dress of the Chinooks of that time," he later wrote.²⁶ After an education in Red River, then in St Thomas, he set out on an adventurous life at sea, including imprisonment in feudal Japan. He returned to the Canadian west coast to work on farms and various commercial ventures. He wrote that, as someone with Indian blood, he resented slurs implying any inferiority because of it.²⁷ In later life, Ranald registered as a member of the Lake Tribe of the Colville Indian Reservation under the name Kumkumly. Despite a limited knowledge of Chinook traditions and language, he claimed to be the chief of the Chinook nation and may have been recognized as such by the Lake Tribe.²⁸ The only other evidence that his Indian ancestry altered the main course of his life comes from a statement in his memoirs: "I felt, ever, and uncontrollably in my blood, the wild strain for wandering freedom; imprints of my Highland father of Glencoe; secondly, and possibly more so (though unconsciously) of my Indian mother." Whether MacDonald himself actually wrote these words is open to considerable doubt, but they may well have expressed his sentiments.²⁹

George Atkinson Jr, whose father had wished to rid him of his Indianness, returned to the fur trade with his brother and established a large family in the James Bay area. George retained his Indian sympathies, encouraging the Coast Indians to seek better payment for their furs and to refuse to hunt geese till "the Englishmen" paid them to do so. His son, George Atkinson III, was educated in England but on his return apparently went back to "his Indian mode of life." Historians Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz explain, "Full time employment with the company was an option many mixed blood,

even the formally educated ones, found less appealing than the traditional life style of the Indian hunter.”³⁰

Integration with Métis Society

Many of the urban-educated fur trade children who rejoined the Métis society of the Prairies had French-speaking fathers. Pierre Falcon or “Pierre the Rhymer” was born near today’s Swan River, Manitoba, the son of a North West Company employee and an Indian woman. Baptized in Lower Canada in 1798, he stayed there with relatives until, aged fifteen, he returned to Red River as a clerk in the North West Company. He married Mary, daughter of the Métis leader Cuthbert Grant. Sympathetic to the Métis cause during the Red River troubles, he wrote many songs about the lifestyle of voyageurs and plainsmen, which became Métis folksongs.³¹

Cuthbert Grant had been born in Saskatchewan of a Scottish fur trade father and a Métis woman. Taken to Montreal for his education, he joined the North West Company there about 1810. Two years later he was sent back to the Upper Country and rose in the company ranks. Due to his influence among his fellow Métis, Grant led the fight against the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Red River settlement, including the 1816 massacre at Seven Oaks. When younger men such as Louis Riel took over as Métis leaders, Grant’s influence declined and so did his importance to the company. He is nevertheless credited with an essential role in creating the concept of a Métis nation.³²

A Fourth Path

Harriet Gorham’s study of mixed-descent families in the western Great Lakes region suggests a fourth path. She finds that these families had very little shared sense of a separate Métis identity. In this region, Gorham finds “a sliding ethnic and social ‘category’” wherein people of mixed descent moved back and forth between their Indian and their white backgrounds. This group functioned “as a moving bridge between the two larger societies, unencumbered by rigid ethnic identities[, and] may have been crucial to successful transactions between Indian and White interest groups.” She argues that the sense of identity of such individuals may, as the social context demanded, similarly have swung back and forth between the two cultures. Billy Caldwell, for example, spent his childhood on a Mohawk reserve near Grand River, spent his adolescence among the British elite in Detroit, worked as a young man in the British Indian Department, became a fur trader at Chicago, and finished his life as a chief among Indians west of the Mississippi.³³

PREVIOUS WORK ON THE CHARLES OAKES ERMATINGER FAMILY

Many books and articles mention members of the various branches of the Charles Oakes Ermatinger family. None, however, has looked at the cultural divide in the lives of the children of Charles and Charlotte. In her groundbreaking biography, *The Ermatinger Family*, Gladys McNeice only briefly mentions the Indian heritage of the children and, in less than a dozen pages, recounts some highlights of their lives after the death of their father.³⁴ In several books and articles, Elinor Senior mentions, in passing, the role of William and Charles Ermatinger in turbulent Montreal during the 1840s and 1850s, describing the two men as much loved, regardless of their Indian heritage, by the people of the city; but exploration of this theme lies beyond the purview of her work.³⁵ Many potted biographies and other works briefly mention the family but say little about the significance of their dual Ojibwa-Canadian heritage for the children.

The Urban Canadian Grandparents

In the spring of 1775 Lawrence Ermatinger, fur trader, prepared to send six birchbark canoes from Lachine, just above Montreal on the St Lawrence River, to Grand Portage at the head of Lake Superior. Each canoe probably carried about four tons of trading goods, men, and supplies.¹ This hazardous annual voyage along the St Lawrence, Ottawa, and French rivers, then through the Great Lakes, would take seven to eight weeks. At Grand Portage Lawrence's partner and brother-in-law, Forrest Oakes, anxiously awaited their arrival. Unfortunately, Lawrence could not find a man to put in charge of the canoes. He advised Oakes, "If in my power I'll come along with them myself." But in the next sentence he withdrew the offer: "Don't depend upon this, for I shall be once more obliged to go to England this Fall, owing to some bad usage I have met with from one of my correspondents."² Lawrence never did go west of Lachine. He remained very much an urban man.

THE BEGINNINGS

Lawrence, paternal grandfather to the Ojibwa-Canadian children of Charles Oakes Ermatinger, was born in the Swiss town of Schaffhausen on 29 October 1736, to Anna Maria (née Buhl) and Laurenz Ermatinger. In May 1757 Lawrence became a member of his father's guild of gunsmiths.³ He emigrated to London and became a merchant but later went into bankruptcy.⁴ On the conquest of Canada, when he was about twenty-four, he moved to Montreal. Lawrence was doing business there in early 1762 and the following year signed a partnership with an English trader named Forrest Oakes.⁵

On 2 February 1764, Lawrence was back in London and married Forrest's sister, Jemima, at St Clement Danes. They would have seven children.⁶ Two of Forrest and Jemima's sisters also married immigrants from Britain. Mary married Edward Chinn, a trader on the Great Lakes; Margaret married Edward William Gray, later an influential importer, notary, militia officer, and sheriff of Montreal from 1776 to 1810.⁷ The brothers-in-law developed close business associations.

THE URBAN HUSTLER

All the newly arrived anglophone merchants, whether Upper Country or urban, had to be hustlers. From London, Lawrence ordered “woolens, hosiery, stationery, shoes and leather, shot and gunpowder, hardware, glass, tobacco, Groserly and Oyl, tin, ribbons, parfumery, cordage, gloves, haberdashery, hats.” From another supplier he wanted “damaged calicoes, handkerchiefs and very cheap woolen drapery or cheap linen . . . articles which fetch a tolerable good price” in Montreal. He offered to buy one client land on the River St John’s, probably Rivière St Jean, flowing into the Saguenay fiord on Quebec’s north shore: “You may depend upon it, I shall take all necessary steps for your interest.” He told another that he probably could not barter the client’s wine for wheat or salt but might be able to sell the wine by auction. He sold stoves, pipes, nails, and other hardware to the officer commanding the British army post at Sorel. He tried to charter a vessel of 100 to 150 tons to carry wheat “to some part of portugall.”⁸ In short, Lawrence traded in anything that would bring him a profit, including slaves. He asked a colleague in Quebec to get as much as he could by selling a female slave, writing, “She cost me \$130.” She had neither friends nor relatives, he added, and no acquaintances to ruin her. Lawrence finally sold her for \$100.⁹

Like all small Montreal traders, Lawrence was undercapitalized and constantly short of money. His excuses for not paying his bills were many and varied, especially after a fire destroyed his premises and stores in 1770. Alternatively, his canoes had just arrived from the Upper Country, which “detains me of every sou. I will have some soon.” Or a ship becalmed off Montreal would make a difference to his remittance that fall. “The loss of a worthy sister who died in childbed has thrown my family in some confusion,” and prevented him from paying a creditor, or a very bad hunt by “the savages” had meant one-third fewer peltries than the previous year, or the account sent by another London supplier on 1 December never came to hand; otherwise he “should not have passed it unnoticed, you may depend upon [it].”¹⁰ Too often, Lawrence’s conjuring tricks were transparent. A client in London wrote that Lawrence had promised to send money but since then had not even written: “If you fail [to send the money] you may depend upon it, I shall take measures that will be very prejudicial to you.”¹¹

THE UPPER COUNTRY GREAT-UNCLE

Forrest Oakes was probably born in London on 21 August 1734 to Jemima and Joseph Oakes.¹² The earliest Canadian record of Oakes and Edward Chinn (his brother-in-law) puts them in Montreal in 1762, when the town was still under martial law. A court martial charged Oakes, Chinn, and a third man named Grant with insulting and assaulting an ensign in the British army. Grant and Chinn were fined and made to “humbly” apologize to the officer before his whole regiment. Oakes spent only twenty-four hours in

prison with no apology required, since the court found the insults had been reciprocated.¹³

From 1769 almost until his death in Montreal in 1783, Oakes lived and worked mainly in and around Grand Portage. Many fur traders operated from this key area at the start of the fourteen-kilometre portage from Lake Superior to the Pigeon River, which led to Lake Winnipeg and the West. The traders had built posts, usually walled, at Grand Portage when Alexander Henry passed through in 1775. He found fierce competition between traders, who were all “in a state of extreme reciprocal hostility, each pursuing his interests in such a manner as might most injure his neighbour.”¹⁴ That description would include Oakes, who, according to Lawrence’s letters, was then living in the area. Oakes had at least one liaison with an Indian woman producing a son, John Meticamus Oakes.¹⁵

DOING BUSINESS IN THE UPPER COUNTRY

Oakes always sent his partner careful instructions for his canoes. In 1768, for example, he told Lawrence to send them as soon as possible, and not later than 6 July. They were to head for Grand Portage by South St Mary’s (Sault Ste Marie, on the south shore). Oakes himself intended to travel from Grand Portage toward Michilimackinac to meet the canoes. He wanted Lawrence to engage a guide who understood Lake Superior. The canoes should then travel along the lake, firing guns whenever another canoe passed by so that Oakes would not miss them. Lawrence must get good canoes and ensure that they were filled with provisions. He must engage good winter men, fore and hind men, with specified amounts paid in advance. He should engage the men to go from Montreal to Sault Ste Marie “for one price certain,” and then make a second price for the men who would continue west across Lake Superior.¹⁶

Business relations between Lawrence and Oakes were not always harmonious, though the men were joined in a complex and reciprocal network of debt. In 1772, Oakes accused his brother-in-law of acting extravagantly in buying tobacco on assignment. Lawrence claimed the accusation was unmerited, replying, “You may depend on its being altered if [there is] any error; for I don’t want you to be my slave, nor was it my inclination to make you one, nor should I chuse that anyone should make a slave of you.” Lawrence finished by saying he intended to sail for England in the fall, provided he received 40,000 livres from Oakes by return of the canoes. He added, “I have assured your creditors that you would pay them as soon as possible. If you can send Meredith something, he seems to be very angry.” Two years later, Lawrence wrote, “When you are here on the spot, you may either make a connection with someone else or continue with me ... I assure you, I do all I can for your interests, as if you was present.” Despite these occasional tensions, the partnership continued until the death of Oakes.¹⁷

Because of government restrictions on trade, eighteenth-century traders in Montreal and Quebec often skirted the law. At this time merchants could legally trade only at fortified posts and not directly at Indian villages. Merchants also had to give a security worth twice the value of their goods, to ensure that they would obey all regulations. In 1764, Lawrence received a letter from his other brother-in-law, Edward Chinn, based at St Jean, an island in Lake Superior. Chinn wrote, "This is the third letter this morning, and I am obliged to take every precaution for fear of miscarriage, for Col. Christie will seek every opportunity to hinder our work. Therefore, you must remember to get a pass for what provisions you send that it may not be stopped."¹⁸ Apparently the local British commander had his eye on Lawrence and Chinn.

LAWRENCE'S SOCIAL VIEWS

From the first, many francophone traders of Quebec co-operated with their anglophone counterparts. Socially, the two groups of merchants mingled, and mixed marriages were quite common. Lawrence, too, spoke French and carried on commercial relations with Canadian merchants. His letters in French are as amicable as those he wrote in English. However, a letter to an English contact in Quebec hints at Lawrence's feelings towards the Canadiens. Lawrence wanted his correspondent to engage for three years a boy of about fourteen and also "a sober sprightly [sic] young man" to work for him in the Upper Country. The latter had to be an Englishman or a Scot who could write clearly: "It must not be a Canadian if such should offer." By "Canadian," he meant, of course, a francophone Canadian. Similarly, he warned a London correspondent against a Canadian merchant, a Monsieur Orillat: "Don't invite him for I assure you many of the French are but very indifferent correspondents."¹⁹

Towards Indians, Lawrence had a certain ambivalence. They were in one sense an enemy. The peoples traditionally allied with the French before the conquest often remained hostile to the English after it, and the great chief Pontiac organized an uprising against the new rulers in 1763. In 1772, mutual hostility still prevailed, and when Lawrence learned that some Indians had been killed near Niagara, he worried that retaliatory "disturbances" might imperil his canoes. A week later he wrote, "We have had no news yet from the Upper Country, how the traders have made out. All we know is that the savages have been quiet this last winter."²⁰ (The canoes eventually arrived unharmed.)

On the positive side, the Indians were also consumers of goods and suppliers of furs. Despite his worries about their behaviour, Lawrence included liquor and guns among the goods he traded to Indians. His 1769 outfit of two canoes and fifteen men took 160 gallons of rum and brandy, thirty-two gallons of wine, 500 pounds of gunpowder, 1,000 pounds of ball

and shot, and sixteen rifles to the Upper Country trade.²¹ As Lawrence told a supplier when ordering 100 North West guns and 1,000 balls, “You will know that these are absolutely necessary for the Indian trade.”²² Potential profits clearly outweighed potential dangers.

LAWRENCE AND THE TORY TRADITION

Lawrence and his fellow merchants from England were patriotic and loyal to the Crown, and they expected the Crown to uphold their rights as Englishmen. Those rights, as they saw them, implied the political, legal, and religious institutions of England, not those of New France. The Quebec Act of 1774 formalized much of what the Protestant merchants already hated: no Assembly, Roman Catholics allowed to hold political office, English law in criminal matters but the law of New France in civil matters, lack of habeas corpus, and the abolition of jury trials in civil suits. The indignation of Lawrence and his fellow English traders boiled. Petitions flowed from their coffee houses. On 12 November 1774 they wrote to King George saying they had found to their “unutterable Grief” that they had lost the protection of the English laws so universally admired. Instead they were to be subject to the laws of New France, disgraceful to them as Britons and ruinous to their properties.²³ Despite such petitions, the Quebec Act remained in force.

The real test of Lawrence’s loyalty to the Crown came with the invasion of Canada during the American Revolution. By June 1775, with rebel forces holding the approaches to Montreal, Lawrence deplored “the unhappy situation the Province is in.” A few weeks later he almost despaired. Trade was very dull, with no sales and no market. Indeed, nothing was stirring. “Feelings are very high. God knows what will become of us,” he wrote. In late September, a defending force won a small victory against the reckless rebel Ethan Allen, whose party, when attacked, fled their camp outside Montreal. Allen himself was captured. Lawrence called it “the glorious 25th Sept.” Three weeks later he was still optimistic. Montreal, he wrote, was full of Canadian *habitants* (farmers), and the invader would soon be dealt with in the manner he deserved. A rumour excited him to write, “I hope they [the rebels] will stay a little longer, for something is now preparing [for] which I hope they will remember Canada.”²⁴

But hopes built on “the glorious 25th” soon faded, and the British commander at Chambly surrendered. Many *habitants* and merchants lost their enthusiasm for the Loyalist cause. In October, Lawrence wrote to London his last letter for 1775. He enclosed a bill of lading and an invoice for fifteen bales of peltries and two casks of castoreum. “God grant,” he wrote anxiously, “they may come to good market.”²⁵

Montreal, captured by the Americans in November, was guarded by a small garrison under Brigadier-General David Wooster. Wooster’s actions soon alienated both merchants and *habitants*. With news of the American defeat

at Quebec on 31 December, Wooster drew up a list of sixty-four prominent Montrealers recognized as good Loyalists. He sent soldiers to disarm twelve of them, including Lawrence Ermatinger and his brother-in-law Edward William Gray.²⁶ After Montrealers protested loudly that Wooster was violating the terms of the surrender, the Loyalists remained free for the moment. Later, Wooster rearrested Gray and three others and sent them to Chambly.²⁷

Lawrence, too, went in fear of his liberty if not of his life. He would not submit to the rebel demands, he wrote later, so they had disarmed him. He had been “in great anxiety of mind.” Every moment he had been threatened with jail, “which, had that been done, would have proved very fatal.” However, he added, “I did stand out to the last.” He also walled his goods up behind the stone wall of his house, then left town to hide in a remote part of the country. As a result, “I only lost about £200.”²⁸ By mid-June 1776, the British had driven the invaders out of the province and Lawrence was back in business. At news of peace negotiations he wrote, “I sincerely wish matters may be adjusted, though not in such a manner as to bring disgrace on old England.”²⁹

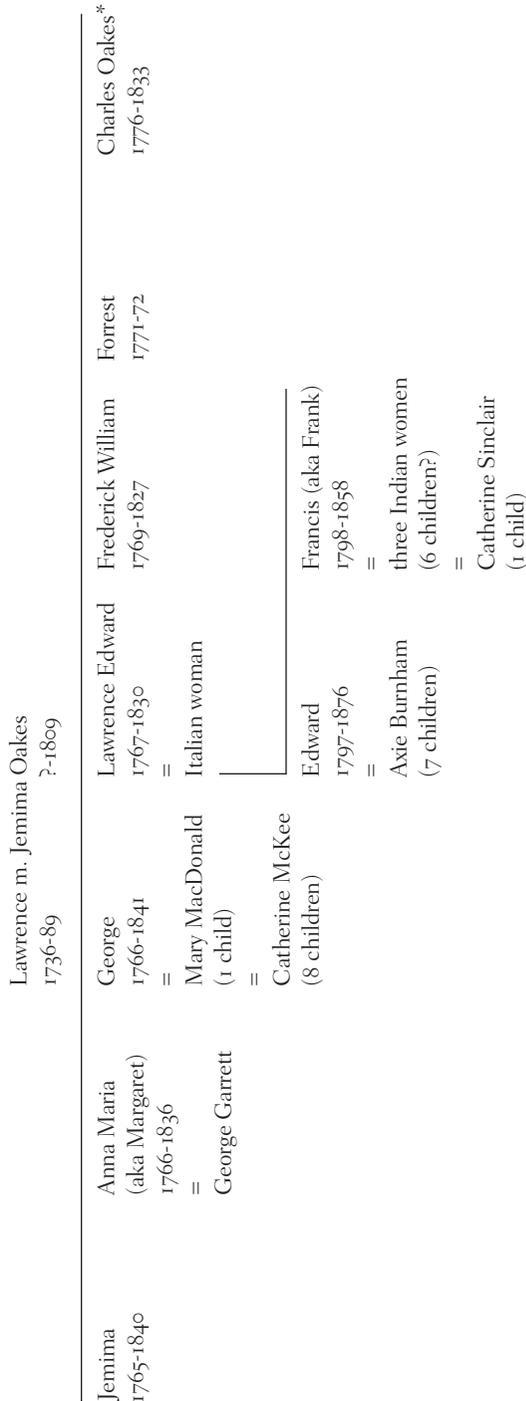
JEMIMA AND HER CHILDREN

In England, Jemima Oakes’ family seem to have been reasonably prosperous, and the evidence suggests she was well educated. On leaving for London in 1772, Lawrence wrote, “The business will be carried on in the same manner as usual, and under the same form, with only the addition that Mrs. Ermatinger will during my absence sign the letters, bills and any other matters which may occur ... You have her signing on foot of this.”³⁰ Her active participation in their business affairs seemed confirmed in 1782 when an M.P. Loubet bought Lawrence’s stone house on St Paul Street in Montreal. Loubet ran an advertisement in the *Quebec Gazette* saying he had bought the property from “Mr. Lawrence Ermatinger, Merchant of Montreal, and Mrs. Jemima Oakes, his wife.”³¹

Because Lawrence and Jemima married in England, their marriage was subject to English common law rather than the civil code carried over from New France.³² English common law at the time gave the husband almost total authority over the household. He could do what he wished with his wife’s personal property, except sell or give away her real property, which had to go to her heirs. The famous jurist, William Blackstone, writing on the “rights of persons” and the “rights of things” under English law, argued that husband and wife were one person in law: “A man cannot grant anything to his wife ... for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence.” However, “A woman indeed may be attorney for her husband; for that implies no separation from, but is rather a representation of her lord.”³³ Thus Lawrence could legally make his wife his attorney. Presumably Jemima made any business decisions necessary while “her lord” was overseas.

Figure 2

THE FAMILY OF LAWRENCE AND JEMIMA ERMATINGER



* See Figure 4, p. 38, for the family of Charles Oakes Ermatinger.

Sources: Gladys McNeice, *The Ermatinger Family of Sault Ste. Marie* (Sault Ste. Marie and 49th Field Regiment RCA Historical Society, 1984), 1, appendix 2; LAC, MG 19, A2, series 4, vol. 1, file 1, nos. 6477, 6478, 6481, 6482, 6483, 6487, 6495, 6499; LAC, MG 19, A2, series 2, vol. 1, part 2, no. 19, John Clowes to Edward Ermatinger.

Jemima also had an active social conscience. In 1797, Pte. Francis McDade was court-martialled and found guilty of deserting the 5th Regiment of Foot. In a petition, he hoped that his youth (he was twenty-five) and his previous good character, would bring annulment of the death sentence. Thirty-two women, including Jemima and her two daughters, signed the petition.³⁴

Jemima and Lawrence had seven children, though Forrest died as a baby (Figure 2). Little is known of the two daughters, Jemima and Anna Maria (also known as Margaret). Jemima remained single; Anna Maria married George Garrett, an army surgeon, but they had no issue. Lawrence Edward found his career in the Commissariat of the British Army, while Frederick William was a businessman and sheriff of Montreal. The remaining two brothers entered the fur trade. They both operated mainly out of Sault Ste Marie, George on the American side of the border, Charles Oakes on the Canadian side (see Appendix C). Charles, born in 1776 and the youngest in the family, married Charlotte Katawabidai and became father of the children featured in this book.

THE FINAL YEARS

In the fall of 1782, Lawrence's partner, Forrest Oakes, returned to Montreal from Grand Portage. He died the next spring.³⁵ At that time, a great scandal of overextended government-backed credit and illegal speculation swept the province, and Quebec merchants were close to ruin.³⁶ None suffered more than Lawrence Ermatinger. On 1 October 1782 he sold his stone house on St Paul's Street, but this did not suffice. In August 1783, debts forced him to mortgage his remaining property to a London firm, and he then withdrew from business. On 6 October 1789, Lawrence died in Montreal, aged but fifty-three.³⁷ He left no will. Jemima lived another twenty years.

LAWRENCE, A SUMMING UP

Though probably no less honest than the majority of his fellow merchants, Lawrence was probably no more so. The frequency with which his creditors were assured they could "depend upon it," and then found that they could not, or at least not right now but soon, gives an eighteenth-century resonance to the phrase "Your cheque is in the mail." His bankruptcy in London, and the near-bankruptcies of 1770 and 1783, do not inspire great confidence in his business acumen.

Nevertheless, Lawrence Ermatinger had the courage to venture his small capital in a new and wild land. He had the business skill to run his Canadian operation for more than twenty years under risky and often primitive conditions, and with inadequate capital. He also brought up and educated a family who went on to make a solid contribution to the development of his adopted country. All that was no mean achievement for a man born in the very different social conditions of Switzerland.